

International Development Sub-Committee on the Work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact

Oral evidence: ICAI's review on the UK's humanitarian support to Syria, HC 1022

Wednesday 18 July 2018

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Members present: Paul Scully (Chair); Richard Burden; Ivan Lewis; Stephen Twigg.

Questions 1 - 25

Witnesses

I: Alison Evans, Lead Commissioner, ICAI; Kathryn Rzeszut, Team Leader, ICAI; Lindy Cameron, Director General for Country Programmes; Ben Mellor, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Alison Evans, Kathryn Rzeszut, Lindy Cameron and Ben Mellor.

Q1 Chair: Thank you very much, everyone, for coming. Thank you for your report, Kathryn and Alison. What we will do is go through the usual set of questions, with the two of you side by side. I was going to ask a question to Kathryn and Alison first. Maybe you can then say any introductory words you want to, and then, Lindy and Ben, when you answer your first question if you want to make any overall response, please feel free to come in briefly at that point.

Alison, I usually open with methodology. You included visits to three governorates in Syria and case studies of seven of DFID's 27 implementing partners. On what basis were those areas and organisations selected?

Dr Evans: Thank you, Chair. I will take up your offer, if you do not mind, to say a couple of opening words and then we will focus specifically on your question. This is a review we have undertaken specifically on the humanitarian response in Syria. I wanted to say a couple of things, because sometimes it is easy to get immune to the sense of scale and gravity of this particular process in Syria. This is the eighth year of this particular crisis and conflict. From a pre-war population of about 22 million people—estimates that I know change all the time, which I am sure we will discuss this morning—there are at least around 5.6 million people in severe humanitarian need in Syria. That is bigger than the population of Scotland. It really does pull you up short. That is a subsection of the total population in some sort of need, which is in the region of 13 million or so. It is an extraordinary scale and it is important to keep that in mind as we talk through some of our findings on this UK aid response.

It is also a crisis that has many faces and is subject to ever-changing dynamics. The conflict lines within Syria are ever changing. Patterns of displacement of people are changing and humanitarian access that might have been secured today could be gone tomorrow. In that kind of environment, that sets a really challenging set of circumstances to mount any kind of response. When we undertook this review, we were acutely aware that this was not an everyday humanitarian crisis. In some ways, as we have gone on we have learnt this is a protracted crisis with multiple crises within it. That has meant that this has been an incredibly difficult operating environment to mount a humanitarian response. Ultimately, our overarching assessment and score for this review is a reflection of those challenges and the extent to which DFID in particular has risen to those challenges over the period. That is really where the overall score lands. We are also very clear that there are gaps and issues that we really want to see them address.



Those very same challenges around the operating environment for delivery pose challenges for us in undertaking this review. We could not get any direct access. Therefore, we had to think pretty creatively about how we would be able to follow UK aid spending down to the front line and how we were going to be able to really examine the role played by the partners that work with DFID at field level. The methodology we put together had two components that allowed us to do that, along with seven delivery partners. Those are the major UN agencies and other international NGOs that DFID is working with, but each one of those works with multiple downstream partners within Syria, and we wanted to talk to those directly. A key part of the methodology was actually using Arabic-speaking researchers to be able to—remotely, largely; some of them were based in Turkey and Lebanon—speak directly to people working with those downstream partners in Syria, working on programmes funded by UK aid. That was the first feature, and we spoke to about 37 of these downstream partners. Kathryn will tell you a little bit about why we chose those particular geographies within Syria.

In addition to that, we really wanted to be able to directly counsel the views of aid recipients within communities that were receiving some of the assistance from these downstream partners. With the help of some very brave Syrian researchers, we were able to get direct information from aid recipients—something in the region of just over 300—plus some community leaders, who gave us a very clear set of insights. It is just a snapshot. It is a tiny percentage of the total communities in need but it gave us some very clear insights into the way in which support ultimately from UK aid is actually getting down into the communities.

Do you want to say a couple of words about how we chose the geographies within Syria?

Kathryn Rzeszut: Absolutely. Our community sampling began with a geographic assessment of some of the 2016-17 results that delivery partners reported to DFID. We also assessed which districts and sub-districts were accessible to our Syrian researchers. Based on that, we did a community-level security risk assessment to understand which communities were permissible for data collection. Based on those analyses, we used three sampling criteria: type of organisation, so we tried to get a good mix of multilateral organisations and INGOs, as well as sectoral—health, WASH, livelihoods and food distribution—and, finally, we tried to get communities where DFID had several different programmes going on. That was the basis of our community sampling.

Dr Evans: We should say we were only able to get any information from aid recipients in areas outside of government control. That, of course, is a limitation.

Q2 **Chair:** Yes, obviously with all the limitations, you are talking about triangulating the data to eliminate the bias. You have just been talking about it. Are you happy that worked?



Dr Evans: We certainly put a lot of effort into trying to do that, but I hope we have also been extremely transparent about where the limitations of that methodology lie. We feel we were able to go the extra mile in being able to get right down to community and household level within these areas of Aleppo and Daraa. That had not been done in similar evaluations, and it would be fair to DFID to say they do not have a lot of that information on a regular basis either. Yes, of course we were restricted by extreme security challenges and the fact that quite a lot of the partners that DFID is working with predominate in areas outside of government control.

Q3 Stephen Twigg: I have a couple of questions about targeting, mostly aimed at Lindy and Ben. ICAI in the review says that where UK funds are mixed with other donors, earmarking the UK contribution to specific beneficiary groups is a purely notional exercise that enables DFID to claim a particular subset of results for the UK without changing the overall pattern of delivery. They go on to say that ICAI's view is that DFID should use earmarking of funding only where necessary and to the extent necessary to ensure that underserved groups are reached. What is DFID's view on that?

Lindy Cameron: If I can start by making a few opening remarks, we really welcome this review. It highlights the really positive work that DFID has done in what Alison has described as the hardest environment we work in, partly because of the limited access. UK aid is saving the lives of saves millions of vulnerable people across Syria. We were really gratified to hear Syrian voices through this report telling ICAI that UK aid has made Syria safer and more stable, increased public health, reduced local crime and even influenced some decisions about whether people need to leave the country or not. There are lots of really helpful things in the report that will help us strengthen our response. We also really welcomed the recognition of good practice that we had already put in place and has strengthened over time: rigorous and robust checks to prevent fraud, multi-year funding to give certainty to partners and use of information and data.

On this targeting issue, I am really proud of the fact we target UK aid at those most in need on the basis of humanitarian principles to ensure our aid is impartial. We do not politicise it. We routinely monitor partners to ensure they are reaching those most in need and we make our funding condition on this through geographical and sectoral earmarking. We choose partners on the basis of their ability to tackle the most severe needs, to access those who are more severely in need and then to monitor that they are able to do that.

To address your earmarking point, this has been a policy choice, to be honest, but it is a policy nudge as well, because although I recognise Alison's concern about the funds being blended, as a leading donor—and the UK is one of the leading donors, with nearly £1 billion committed and the second largest donor in the whole humanitarian response—what we



have found is that what we do others take note of and shift their own response to, particularly in a crisis where few of us have access.

For us, it is a policy-signalling choice as much as it is an intention to skew what we do. It is an intention to show that we think that it is important to challenge whether aid is reaching those most in need. We cannot reach everybody in Syria; Alison has highlighted the vast numbers of people. We have very much chosen to reach those most in need with lifesaving humanitarian assistance. This is not a development programme; this is a humanitarian response to civilians caught in the middle of a crisis who need protection and need aid to help them survive that.

We do earmark, and we would not look at it in strict programme terms alone; we would look at it in policy terms and influencing terms and the way that it helps others. We saw specifically with the cross-border resolution that what we did with our own aid at that point, in terms of shifting a significant proportion of our aid to cross-border, did shift what everybody else did, partly because, frankly, we created the partnerships that allowed others to then use them but also because others were worried about being left on one side of an argument where we had decided that to reach those most in need we needed to use both channels of access—both cross-border and through Damascus. We consistently review that decision through the crisis, as the conflict has evolved, in order to make sure we continue to reach those most in need.

Q4 Stephen Twigg: On a specific issue that ICAI raises, it said it encountered concern from some delivery partners about the role that local councils play in Syria in drawing up beneficiary lists, and it cited examples where there was improper inclusion of relatives and acquaintances. What is your view on that? Acknowledging what both you and Alison have said in terms of the extraordinarily challenging environment, what are the lessons that can be learnt from that to try to prevent things like that happening in future?

Lindy Cameron: Some of these issues are not specific to Syria. Anywhere where you ask local organisations to draw up lists of those in need—where people are having to choose who gets lifesaving humanitarian aid and who does not—is vulnerable to bias, conscious or otherwise. We are very aware of that and work with partners who we think have the capacity, as I said, both to access those who are most in need and to monitor whether what they are doing is effective or not, in order to be able to give us the capacity to do that. I might call on Ben in a minute to give some examples.

Part of our partner choice is about whether we think organisations have the ability to challenge that. I am sure that it is not a surprise to have found that as an issue, here or anywhere else in a humanitarian context, but it is something we are very aware of and consciously trying to address. This is a very political conflict. It is fair to say that on all sides, Syrians have made choices about what role they play in the conflict. By our choice to move cross-border, we consciously addressed some of the



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bias we were concerned about coming from the Damascus Government's pressure on multilateral agencies in particular. We are also conscious that with local councils we need to do the same thing.

Ben Mellor: If I may expand a little on what Lindy was saying, building on that trusted partner model, we are working with partners who are used to working in these very complex environments. We also make it very clear to them that we are aware of this particular risk: the risk of attempts by local councils or armed groups to divert for their own purposes aid that is intended for those most in need. The issue of beneficiary lists has come up frequently. All our partners are very aware of that risk. The systems that we have in place mean that if they come under any pressure to have manipulated beneficiary lists, that is very rapidly escalated. We can and have suspended aid in those situations where we feel that undue pressure is being put on our delivery partners, either by armed groups or by local councils. They know that, and they know we do not do it in a punitive way but rather in an encouraging way: "Please tell us about this and we can divert it to elsewhere within the operation, where we believe it can still reach those most in need."

Q5 **Stephen Twigg:** Thank you very much. I do not know if Alison or Kathryn wants to comment on the response.

Dr Evans: I completely agree that this is an area that one comes across in humanitarian situations, and it is very much around the speed and alacrity of response that one is testing out. There are two areas, which I hope we will come on to talk about. One relates to the extent to which downstream partners are encouraged to seriously take account of feedback from effective populations and using that actively to course-adjust. We have a query about whether that is being done well enough. Secondly, there is the role of DFID's own third-party monitoring, which again is another part of the jigsaw as to how to get some traction on whether or not those lists are in fact avoiding the problems of both inclusion and exclusion errors. We do not see all those pieces working together as well as they should.

Q6 **Richard Burden:** I think in all of the questions that we are asking today, we do absolutely recognise the hugely challenging environment we are talking about—an environment that not only affects what DFID is able to do but has clearly affected what ICAI is able to do in terms of monitoring what goes on. I suppose everything we say needs to be said in that context.

I do not think anybody, if you went back to 2011, would have been able to predict that we would be where we are in 2018 but, that said, the reality of the situation is that DFID was unprepared for the protracted nature of this conflict. Others were too but DFID was unprepared for that, and the ICAI report says that there were insufficient staff based in the region in the early stage of conflict and that led to frequent flights out from London and so on. Do you recognise that assessment from ICAI, however understandable it is?



Lindy Cameron: This is a really interesting one for me, because of course I was involved at various stages of this conflict previously, as the deputy director of MENA, as the director of MENA and as director of the Stabilisation Unit as well. 20-20 hindsight is a wonderful thing. It is much easier to look back and see the course of the conflict now eight years on than it was at the time. As the report highlights, this was a really complex and challenging context. The Arab Spring was a surprise in scale and nature to all of us, specifically in Syria. DFID had no track record in Syria. We had no presence. We had not worked there as a development partner, so we had no relationships and no local understanding, and our embassy closed in 2012. We responded using the crisis mechanisms that we had that were appropriate: the CHASE OT humanitarian advisers we could draw on to scale up and then big multilateral partners.

When I look back at the timeline—which I find really helpful, actually, in the report, to make me reflect on how the situation had changed—we did not expect, for example, this huge geographical reach of Daesh reasonably early on, when I look at it in the conflict, and the change in conflict dynamics that created. We were quite cautious because we thought initially we could respond through the multilaterals. It is also worth remembering that actually there were very few NGO partners in country initially; there were only three or four NGOs, as I recall, operating from Damascus, and not all ones that were obvious humanitarian partners. It took humanitarian partners some time to work out themselves what the scale-up mechanisms were. We were quite cautious in the way we then expanded our own bilateral footprint, and the thing that triggered us realising we could not simply channel through multilateral channels was the recognition that we were going to have to move to more cross-border work, which meant we were going to have to build more delivery channels and we were going to have to build a better information picture ourselves, rather than simply relying on the one we were getting.

Do I recognise it? I have to say I do not recognise the suggestion that we thought the conflict was going to end rapidly. I have worked extensively in conflict and I have not yet been in one that I thought that was going to be over quickly. I do recognise that it is much more complex in hindsight than we understood it possibly could be at the time. That is true for absolutely all of us. I have also recognised, in terms of leadership, looking back, that at the point at which we moved more staff into the region, ICAI is right: it became easier. It was quite challenging, because it was not obvious where in the region organisations were going to be based. You had a choice, effectively, between Amman in Jordan, Beirut in Lebanon, Istanbul in Turkey or Gaziantep, latterly, in Turkey. We were hoping that the development and humanitarian community would, in a sense, coalesce around one of those hubs. In practice, they have ended up quite fragmented across all of those, with the cross-border response then run more from Turkey because actually access is more permissive across that border. We all struggled a bit to work out where we could best operate from when most of us could not operate inside Syria, except



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for the big UN agencies and latterly cross-border with the NGO community. The honest answer is that I recognise some of it. I do not recognise the sense of optimism that the conflict could end quickly.

Q7 Richard Burden: In a minute perhaps I will ask Alison to say something about that. I guess this is important not simply, as you say, in terms of 20-20 hindsight but in terms of what lessons can be learnt for the future. ICAI also said that you had recruitment problems, and one of the consequences of that was that you ended up having to appoint relatively junior staff to some really quite challenging co-ordinating and other roles. Maybe the precise circumstance of Syria will not be replicated in another situation, but sadly it may well be in future that a conflict changes from how it starts off and becomes highly challenging and protracted. What lessons do you learn about what you could do differently to prepare for such things in the future?

Lindy Cameron: You are absolutely right. This has been very helpful for looking back and learning lessons. I really welcome ICAI's conclusion that we should do more thinking about how we apply the lessons from Syria to other future conflicts. We have done quite a lot of thinking about lessons within Syria, in a sense—how we apply what worked in, let us say, Aleppo to other similar inside-Syria crises. We have probably done less thinking about how we might apply it to future crises, and that is something we are going to work on with our protracted crisis hub.

Some of the lessons we have learnt are about the optimal balance of DFID staff and contractor staff. It is about getting that mix of staff right, and also getting the right mix of technical humanitarian expertise versus large-scale programme management expertise, and we have adjusted that over time. This conflict did demand programme management of big humanitarian programmes at a scale that perhaps I have only seen recently in Yemen. We have partial versions of that, in north-eastern Nigeria for example, but often that is as part of a bigger team. This effectively was a whole team, all of which was working on large-scale humanitarian response. We have learnt quite a lot about how to try to get the right mix of the kind of skills we need to be able to do that and also about how to work with our central departments who operate, for example, as the lead partners for UN agencies or for NGO relationships. These relationships in Syria have become some of our biggest relationships with both the humanitarian NGOs and the humanitarian multilateral partners. Pulling those together has been really important. Those are some of the lessons I have learnt from this.

There is also a whole set of sub-lessons, for example on how we were able to respond when Daesh took over western Iraq and eastern Syria, and how to work in high-threat operating environments where there is a high risk of armed actors and terrorist organisations intruding on that. I know a delivery stabilisation unit has been thinking quite hard about what it has learnt in terms of some of the stabilisation issues. There are multiple levels at which we are thinking about this.



Dr Evans: It is good to see Lindy talk about thinking ahead. You will see from the review that we did this is an area where we really do feel that DFID have not applied sufficient effort in recent times to be able to capture and codify those lessons for what will inevitably be another time, unfortunately. I have a couple of things to say. On this point about programme management staff and the ability to manage large humanitarian programmes in a highly risky environment, we undertook a review of fiduciary risk management in 2016, which included a look at this in Syria at the time. We made a recommendation at that time that DFID needed to think seriously about how to brigade staff with experience of managing large programmes with the skillsets to manage highly risky environments to steward UK aid funds. At the time, we got a very lukewarm response from DFID on that recommendation. Come forward to this review, and we see so much that has improved on the fiduciary risk management side, but the point about how you access experienced programme management staff at short notice to deal with a response like this still stands. There needs to be a response to that.

The other point is about learning how to identify the tipping points—points where emergencies turn into extended emergencies and at what point then they need to think about skill mix, and at what point do they need to make sure that humanitarian specialisms are already embedded within the team to think about how to respond. We feel that, yes, that may be a point with hindsight but it is certainly something to learn for the future.

Lindy Cameron: If I look at our response, for example, to the Burma, Bangladesh and Rohingya crisis, I know that that team, with the benefit of looking at this crisis, has thought about that very early on and is working effectively on two tracks. It is both worrying about how to respond to the immediate crisis and thinking about how the crisis could evolve and become extremely protracted. Other teams have taken on that lesson, and the protracted crisis hub in CHASE has really helped to drive thinking about, frankly, the almost inevitability of crises becoming quite prolonged in the current context.

Q8 **Chair:** Lindy, ICAI argues that once the protracted nature of the crisis became clear, you should have focused more on cash transfers and livelihood work to stimulate local markets. Your response suggested that Syria remains too unstable for that. How are you going to know when the time is right to move that focus?

Lindy Cameron: I am going to ask Ben to make a couple of comments on this. There is a question that will be decided at some point about what the future response would be in a very different context, but part of that is a very different political conflict context that we have to take into account.

Ben Mellor: From a policy and from a practical, pragmatic programme perspective, we would love to be doing more in the cash and livelihood space. I think that is what we said in our response to the ICAI report. We



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absolutely recognise that, first, it is something that is good value for money and is effective, and also, which is another point that the ICAI report picked up, that it is what the beneficiaries are looking for in terms of the kind of support.

We also have to recognise that we need more stability and safety in order to be able to deliver those sustained inputs. That is what you require when you are moving into a livelihoods response. The problem, which Alison said in her opening remarks, is that it is a protracted crisis that includes multiple crises within it. Too often we are looking at live conflict situations, which means that we are still not able to move firmly into that livelihoods space.

Having said that, even in that situation, something like 14% of our portfolio this year is in the livelihoods space. The average, as ICAI pointed out, was 6% over the last five years. We are doing livelihoods where we are able to. If I could just share with the Committee one example of where cash works even in that really difficult live conflict environment, it was our cash programming in eastern Ghouta, which was the last part of our aid to have to be withdrawn. Even after all other aid was not able to reach eastern Ghouta whilst the besiegement was taking place and the regime offensive against eastern Ghouta was taking place, our partners were still able to get cash in in order to try to bring humanitarian relief to those people who were, at that point, the most vulnerable in the most dangerous situation.

Q9 Chair: ICAI also talked about moving to focusing on protection activities as well. What is your response to ICAI saying you might focus on that?

Lindy Cameron: There is an interesting debate around how broadly you define “protection” in this context. We would say that everything we do in Syria is about protecting civilians in conflict, effectively. It is not so much a subset of our humanitarian work; the rationale for all our humanitarian work is helping civilians. There are obviously more vulnerable groups within that, and the recommendation of protection is helpful to focus on whether we are doing enough to tackle those with the greatest vulnerability, not just because of the conflict in general but because of their status in that context.

We feel that protection defines, in a sense, the rationale for us being in Syria, which is an extremely risky context and a very difficult crisis. We are, frankly, given the challenge of operating in a country where we have no diplomatic presence and no relationship with the Government, and where the Government are driving the crisis. It is extremely challenging. We feel we do quite a lot on protection. I might ask Ben to comment a bit on some of the detail of that.

Ben Mellor: That is right. As Lindy said, we look at everything we do through a protection lens. There is a slight issue here with the terminology we use. Protection-specific programming tends to be lower cash and more intensive. It does not show up quite as strongly in the



numbers when we report on what we do, as opposed to food security work, which is high-cost. In terms of programmes that are not badged as protection, for example, in this current year we provided support to over 220,000 children and women, giving access to safe places, and we have provided 200,000 people with mine risk education. This is protection programming but does not show up as programming in the protection area.

This is about what we have been trying to do throughout, which is to make sure that whatever we deliver, it changes as the context changes. In that way, we make sure that in those very difficult places we can deliver what people need the most to those who need it the most. Often that is protection. That is where we are trying to go. We are actually at the stage in the crisis where we think it is appropriate to look at some more multi-year protection-specific programming. That is probably where we will go next in terms of our programming. We are now in a different stage of the crisis from where we were even six or 12 months ago, in terms of that kind of very targeted, very specific aid. Let us bring in protection, particularly to people in areas that have been taken over by the regime, where protection is going to be an absolutely critical issue. We want to make sure that we are continuing to deliver support to those people to protect them in their time of need.

Lindy Cameron: If I can perhaps add one point on the cash issue before Alison comes in, I sat on Owen Barder's cash panel. I can assure you that we are very clear on the benefits of cash in areas where we are able to deliver it. If you look at our broader regional programming, we have driven real innovation in what is done in the neighbouring countries on cash and have really challenged partners to say, "Why not cash?" This is a context in which—particularly because of the challenges of using hawala dealers and the challenges of some of the terrorist financing risks—there are quite a lot of risks to how we can do that. It is not a straightforward environment and it is not one in which we have all the controls we would like. It is one of the most difficult environments for us to look at cash programming in.

We have had to weigh up the value-for-money benefit that cash gives you with some of the risks of doing that, and the ability to be confident in our targeting. It has been a tricky choice. I would love to be able to do more cash programming, and I can assure you we look for places where that is possible rather than the other way around, but there are quite significant risks and challenges to delivering, which are part of the challenge of this response.

Dr Evans: It is an incredibly difficult environment, but those same risks pertain to food distribution or NFI distribution, which is the largest share of DFID's activity and support. I am not sure that that, in and of itself, is an absolute constraint on the amount of cash. There are risks to food getting into the wrong hands or food being diverted, and there are measures in place to manage those. It seems that we are looking for



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DFID to really build a very strong and robust case for when and how it does cash, and trying to encourage delivery partners. It is good to hear there is more of that. We would hope to see that follow through into activities on the ground.

I am going to ask Kathryn to say a couple of things about what delivery partners and downstream partners said to us around protection. This is DFID's framing—that this is a protection crisis—and we accept that framing. We know that UK aid is supporting some of the UN agencies that have a protection mandate. We also accept, to some extent, that the focusing on the vulnerable and the most vulnerable communities—those in the most severe need—has within it a protection rationale. However, it was also the case that we really struggled to see real visibility around the work that DFID was doing and supposedly committed to on protection. That was one of our concerns, given the very framing that DFID itself has put on this crisis. Maybe, Kathryn, you can talk to how we picked up the views of delivery partners and downstream partners over the issues around protection.

Kathryn Rzeszut: One of the things that is very clear even from the reporting that the delivery partners have done on their protection activities is that as there has been a focus on protection programming and an increase in protection activities, it has been very challenging for many of those partners who are not traditionally involved in that sector to recruit and retain the staff with those skills and experience. Out of our delivery partner sample of seven, there was only one that had the longstanding programme that involved multiple protection activities, such as legal support to communities, safe spaces for women, community centres, et cetera. It has been a rather challenging thing for delivery partners to be able to move into those specific activities.

Q10 **Richard Burden:** One of the things that the ICAI report found was that when issues with delivery partners were flagged in the screening process, that was not necessarily subsequently addressed in the design or management of subsequent programmes. Again, do you recognise that and, if so, how do you justify it?

Ben Mellor: One of the features of the Syria response has been this enhanced due diligence and these assessments that we have put in place, as Alison mentioned. We enhanced it again in 2016-17, in the light of ICAI's report and our own thinking on how to approach this. When you do enhanced due diligence, of course, the real challenge behind your question becomes the "So what?" to that due diligence, because due diligence is meant to be an assessment of the capability, strengths and weaknesses. The assessment that we have to make in trying to deliver programmes is about whether these are areas that can be strengthened for a particular partner—and therefore, because what they are doing is unique, or they are the only people with the ability to operate in a particular sector or area, we will work with them to build their capability as they deliver—or whether, because they have not succeeded and not



passed the due diligence, we will simply say to them, “Until such time as you are able to strengthen X or Y, we will not engage with you.” That is absolutely the cornerstone of this trusted partner approach. We have to be able to make those assessments.

In terms of the ICAI concern, particular issues were raised around some of our localisation agenda and how it tied in with some of those reports. There was an issue where that process does, to an extent, favour the large international NGOs that are better able to meet the requirements. I am comfortable that we got that balance right. We have an absolute responsibility to UK taxpayers to make sure that we are dealing with partners. We want to work more with local partners because we think they bring real value.

What we did is to take a blended approach. With all our international partners, we say, “You are responsible for building the capacity of your downstream partners”—we work with some 259 downstream partners—“and making sure that they are able to deliver so that you are building local capacity.” There were also a small number of Syrian local partners to whom we said, “Because you are Syrian and because you are working in this region, we will work specifically with you to build your capability.” That has taken a long time, which is what is picked up in the report. We have not quite managed to get them to the stage where we can work with them in the same way as we can with our longer-term international partners, but that is still very much something we continue to work on. There will always have to be a trade-off between the requirement for an absolutely high level of confidence and trust in our partners, versus trying to build capability and growing a market of suppliers that can work in this area.

Q11 Richard Burden: Where the relationship with downstream partners has been through other intermediary delivery partners, you have required the delivery partners to report quarterly on the downstream partners. ICAI found that while those quarterly reports may have come in, they may well have been reporting on things that were outdated or, in some cases, inaccurate. For the reasons you say, the intermediary delivery partners may well increasingly be bigger international NGOs that can best manage these things. It sounds a bit worrying if even then the information being transmitted back to you was inaccurate or out of date. What do you do to address that?

Ben Mellor: It is very helpful to get ICAI’s feedback on this, and ICAI is part of our control, if you like, in terms of that feedback. We do get feedback from the downstream partners. When we do our third-party monitoring, it is one of the things that we specifically look at to make sure we are not just relying on these intermediaries, as you describe them—the big internationals—to self-report, but checking those reports by talking to the downstream partners. We get feedback on a fairly regular basis, which we do respond to. ICAI has picked up that there are examples where we are not responding quickly enough, and we will



certainly make sure that we are tightening that up, because you are right: that would defeat the purpose of what I was setting out. As I said, it is a cornerstone of our approach—trusted partners, and making sure that their systems are robust. That includes making sure that they are properly acting on issues that are raised.

Q12 Richard Burden: Some of the concerns here are not really a million miles away from some of the things that were flagged up in that *Panorama* report. Basically, it was acknowledged across the piece that some aid monies were probably ending up in the wrong place. DFID's response to that was that the programme was suspended when that was found out about, and action was taken. The criticism was that this all took rather a long time. I just wonder if that is an indication of the kind of problem that ICAI identified.

Lindy Cameron: For the kinds of concerns you are describing, we would expect immediate reporting by partners and immediate action by programme teams. We have, as you know, a zero-tolerance approach to fraud and corruption, and indeed we were very alive to the risks of working in this very complex environment. We routinely work with partners to make sure that they are flagging up those kinds of issues quickly to us, so that we can take decisions together on how to address them. If they are not, that is a fairly serious issue that we then raise with them at a serious partnership level. Ben, did you want to expand on that?

Ben Mellor: I would draw a slight distinction between the accusations of the sort that Lindy has just referred to, and that you referred to in that *Panorama* show, of aid diversion or fraud and corruption or indeed safeguarding risks—those would be accelerated very quickly and would be acted on immediately—as opposed to some of the feedback that has come from our downstream partners, which has been more about the relationship that they have with their intermediaries. That is the one that I have looked at in the light of the ICAI report to see if there is more we can do, which is about building that supply chain piece.

On fraud and corruption, we have sent a very, very clear message down. On the back of the *Panorama* report and on the back of the AJACS case, that has helped us to reinforce with partners the message—if it needed reinforcing—that if there are such cases, they should bring them up to us, because the reputational issues are not just for UK aid but for the whole effort that we are all engaged in. We say, “Escalate those quickly, act quickly and get ahead of this.” We will continue to do that in all cases. For the record, I should say that the AJACS programme was an FCO programme. You did mention that DFID had suspended it; it was an FCO decision to suspend, but we obviously work very closely with the team.

Q13 Richard Burden: You have emphasised that you want to try to make more use of downstream delivery partners, local NGOs and so on, and that you want to build the capacity of Syrian NGOs. That is obviously something that ICAI also recommended that you do. One of the potential problems there, though, has been that while your relations with the big



international delivery partners are probably multi-year funding agreements, when it comes to downstream partners the contracts may be as little as three months at a time. I can understand that to guard against the kinds of abuses that we have been talking about, you would want short contracts, but it also leads to uncertainty. Does that not also potentially undermine the objective of building up capacity, if those downstream partners and Syrian NGOs do not have any certainty going forward?

Lindy Cameron: That is a really tough choice that we face on a regular basis. One of the things we are proud of is the agility and flexibility of the response that we have delivered in this context. A challenge, both for us and for our primary partners, is trying to work out how to do that when in fact we have had to shift the geographical focus of the response quite quickly, often in response to the changing nature of the conflict or the changing manifestation of the conflict. Ben might want to comment a bit more on how we have done that.

Ben Mellor: That is it exactly. I absolutely agree with you and with the ICAI report that those short-term contracts do not support our objectives of building their capacities, but the use of those short-term contracts is about flexibility. Some of the Syrian organisations that are downstream partners work in a very limited geographical area and so the contract they will have is to do a particular thing: to deliver a particular service or a particular good in this area. Because the conflict is a live conflict, we have to have flexibility as the conflict moves and the needs move. We are not going to pick up an organisation from here and move them over there; it will be different. Our partners and intermediaries prefer to keep the flexibility in the contracting. There are two different things going on there: one is about the flexibility and agility, as Lindy said, and the other bit is that overall objective of trying to build capacity over time. We have to square those two things.

Q14 **Richard Burden:** Can we hear from ICAI? What are your views on those matters?

Dr Evans: Those are absolutely the challenges. We certainly heard about those and reflected on them in the report. Some of the delivery chains are very long. There is a question in our minds about whether they need, in all cases, to be as long as they are; and whether more effort could not be focused on trying to build almost a middle tier of strengthened local Syrian organisations to manage these more flexible, smaller activity-specific relationships with very, very local NGOs. This feeds into the observation about multi-year funding, as you said, and who benefits most from that. The large delivery partners, for the most part, are not handing those benefits on.

Those benefits are about capacity and predictability. The local NGO scene in Syria is quite chaotic. It is new, and it is, often, developing in the face of quite serious opposition. There are lots of reasons why this is not an easy environment in which to think about both capacity building and



predictability, but this is year eight. There have been longstanding relationships with many of these partners now. Some are repeat partners. We would have thought we would observe more commitment to trying in those scenarios—not with everyone—to pass on some of those benefits, so that what gets left behind, ultimately, is a capacitated sector that has the ability to carry on with certain kinds of services at the point at which, God willing, the conflict eventually abides. Kathryn, do you have anything more on that?

Kathryn Rzeszut: Another observation that I would make is that the delivery partners' efforts to support the Syrian organisations that deliver, primarily, all the humanitarian aid in Syria really varies across the portfolio. We heard from downstream partners that some are very good at working with them and supporting the development of their administrative, financial and operational capacity—others, not so much. Unfortunately, those organisations are often bound to specific geographies that get the three-month contracts and do not necessarily see the benefits of the delivery partners' capacity development efforts. That is one area.

The second gap that we have to be aware of is that there is very little understanding of how the multilateral organisations—the UN agencies—are working with their downstream partners in the same way as the INGOs may be, to try to build up the local organisations' capacities.

Q15 **Stephen Twigg:** I have a couple of questions about value for money and the observations that ICAI made on that. In the review, ICAI states that for its 2016 funding round, DFID required partners to provide a detailed value-for-money offer. Most partners report on value for money and unit costs every six months. They go on to say, "Despite these efforts to strengthen value for money reporting, we were not offered any examples of DFID making use of this additional unit cost data to achieve savings or efficiencies". Can I ask DFID to comment on that and perhaps to tell us what the data is used for, if it is not use for those purposes?

Ben Mellor: Thank you for the question. First, to give a general response on the issue of how we approach value for money in this context, as we have been saying repeatedly—ICAI is in agreement with us on this—it is obviously a very complex environment. Very rarely are we looking at the lowest unit-cost solution in terms of the value for money. We are looking all the time at what is the most effective way to deliver. The big value for money we have achieved through our effort is, for example, where we were able to ensure, working with ECHO last year, that £1.7 billion of the whole £3.2 billion UN effort was prioritised on those people in most acute need—the 5.6 million people that Alison mentioned in her opening remarks. That kind of value for money of the overall effort is the kind of place where, in terms of our DFID value-for-money story in Syria, we have the big savings and big efficiencies.

In terms of the specific points in your question about what we do and the unit cost piece, we are using the unit cost evidence to make



programming decisions. For example, we are looking at the moment at a water programme that we had in northern Syria. We looked at the unit costs of different delivery methodologies. Should it be tankers? Should it be repairing the existing water system, or should it be building a new water system? We used the value-for-money approach to say that in this situation, repairing the existing water system provided the better value for money. In another context, because of the live conflict, we have gone from a tankering solution, which is more expensive in unit cost, but we were able to take that kind of risk.

It is about making real programming choices based on that value for money. What we are not doing is using it to deliver a cost-saving piece at the end, as we have done in some other contexts where we have used the value-for-money piece to drive the specific cost saving. As I said at the beginning, that is, first, because this is a high-cost operating environment and, secondly, because we think the real value for money is where we have made the overall effort more effective.

Lindy Cameron: One of the reasons that data is important is in helping us to understand and spot fraud. That data is not just about driving value for money in programmes; it is also about helping us understand the cost environment that people are working in and ensuring that they are being realistic about the market, because we have seen that it is quite a complex market. There are some key suppliers that have particular influence in the market, and that has been problematic in terms of the way that is driven to multiple partners. It is a part of understanding the picture.

Ben is right that the primary value-for-money decisions we make are in the strategic choice about what to do, and in the partner choice about who does it. At that first stage, it is a good challenge that we could do better on thinking about how to use the data further in the monitoring stage to improve. As Ben says, absolutely rightly, we are not trying to drive down to the lowest cost of delivery, because we are trying to get highest impact and effect. That is a conscious choice about the role we play in this response, as opposed to others.

Q16 **Stephen Twigg:** I think you have partly answered my next question, but I will ask it anyway and then come back to ICAI. The review argues for a more sophisticated approach with regard to value for money. What are you doing to develop that more sophisticated approach?

Ben Mellor: Following the report, we have refreshed our value-for-money strategy and we have the team looking exactly at the kinds of things that Lindy has just referred to, building on the ICAI report. We will make sure not only that we are using VFM in the way I have talked about, but that we are telling our story. A lot of getting better value for money is the story you are telling and making sure your partners understand what you are trying to get at with it. That is the kind of piece we will be focused on. I hope we will have a better story in April when ICAI comes back to review.



Dr Evans: I am glad to hear about the value-for-money strategy. When we were in Istanbul talking to DFID staff there working on the response, whenever we asked the value-for-money question, the response was, "There is a strategy coming." Throughout the review, we did not see it, so I am delighted to hear it is there. I do not disagree with anything that has been said here but it does chime a little bit with our value-for-money review. Clearly at the strategic level—at the whole-response level—the decision to focus on severity of need has really important value-for-money implications; we very much support that as a direction of travel.

At the activity level, collecting unit cost data is really important. There is a bit in the middle that is about how you are trying to max out on value against these difficult cost metrics that, with delivery partners, we just did not see being used actively to shape programming decisions. There is a lot of really good stuff on paper but we were not reassured, at the point where we were talking to delivery partners and downstream partners—who seem a little less clued in to the value-for-money framing—about how it was actively being used to shape programming decisions.

The example that Ben gave is a perfectly good one but it is quite activity-level. We are looking at filling in that missing middle, where it comes alive as a set of very real programming options you can go for. That is what we were hoping for. I do not know if you have an example of that, Kathryn.

Kathryn Rzeszut: What we saw, particularly in the delivery chain between the delivery partner and the downstream partner, was quite a gap in understanding what value for money meant, both at a unit cost level and at a more results level. Certainly the downstream partners knew they were collecting unit cost information and passing it back up the chain to the delivery partner, but did not know or quite understand how that was impacting what they were doing in Syria. Delivery partners can work with the downstream partners to build the capacity around understanding concepts like value for money, as well as bringing them into the delivery decision making.

Q17 **Richard Burden:** Could I ask you about third-party monitoring? Third-party monitoring is where they have one-day visits. They only go to locations where the delivery partners themselves deem the locations to be suitable. Until recently, they have only been in opposition-controlled areas. Do you think that compromises or reduces the effectiveness of that process?

Ben Mellor: We have alluded already to some of the challenges, so I will not go over that again. In a way, the third-party monitoring piece is right at the heart of that challenge and that complexity, and indeed how we respond to it. We have used third-party monitoring in the context of Syria to complement the trusted partner—the enhanced due diligence and the partner's own monitoring process—with, if you like, a checking process at the end, to make sure it is getting down to the beneficiaries that need it. We were talking earlier about that with the intermediaries, in your



previous line of questioning. That has been a useful part of the check. It has not been our primary control; it has been a part of our control. Because of the difficulty of getting it, it has been fairly minimal compared to other contexts, for example, that we looked at in Yemen or in Somalia, where we are similarly operating in very difficult operating environments and cannot be on the ground ourselves. It has been appropriate.

What we have missed—and I very much welcome the focus the ICAI report has put on this—is not so much the controls piece as the lessons learned and the broader pieces that come out from good third-party monitoring, which we have not got as much of in the Syria context. One of the things we are doing, therefore, in terms of enhancing our third-party monitoring now, is recognising that there is much more we can be doing. Even with all the constraints, we believe we have a model where we can do more in that space, and we would like to.

It was a conscious decision to do the level of third-party monitoring that we have done as part of our controls, and it was to complement that upfront due diligence and trusted partner model.

Lindy Cameron: If I can just put it in the context of other difficult environments we work in, we use third-party monitoring extensively in both Somalia and Yemen, and we have a very live conversation between the different high-risk humanitarian programmes across DFID, where we compare different methodologies. What is interesting is that we have tended to use deeper third-party monitoring where we are using a wider range of partners, not all of whom necessarily have a UK presence or an international relationship.

There is a difference between the Syrian response, which is essentially almost entirely delivered through, as Ben described, trusted partners—international organisations, either NGOs or multilateral partners, with whom we have a wider relationship—and then places such as Yemen and Somalia where we have a wider range of delivery partners and therefore frankly use third-party monitoring as a more important way to test that they are really delivering. In a sense, it is a higher starting level of trust in the partner's own ability to self-report and more focus on building their own monitoring systems to make sure that for everything they do—whether it is funded by us or by others—they have a better and more effective monitoring system. It is a good challenge and we are always really open to ideas on, frankly, what works better.

Third-party monitoring is expensive. That is the only thing I should say. It adds cost to the response, and we have to be confident that it is helping us to drive the kind of value we talked about in response to your last question.

Q18 Richard Burden: I mentioned the fact that until recently that third-party monitoring, where it does happen, had been restricted to opposition-controlled areas. Your response says it has more recently been rolled out to government areas as well. How is that going?



Ben Mellor: As the number of people in need in regime areas continues as a proportion of the whole—effectively as the regime takes control of more of the territory—if we are going to carry on making sure that our humanitarian aid gets to those who need it most, then logically more of our humanitarian aid is going to go into those regime areas. Therefore, although it is very difficult and very expensive, we clearly need to enhance the monitoring that we are doing in those areas.

I am not going to sit here today and tell you that it is going to be easy. It is a big challenge. The regime does not, for example, allow us at the moment to monitor anything we are doing on food or non-food items—so things. They do not allow that to be monitored by our independent monitors. They will allow us to look at what we are doing in education and health. As we move into the protection space, it may be that it will help to shape the kinds of interventions that we are able to do in regime areas, because we will only do those things, going to back to our first principles, where it is reaching those most in need, where it is able to be delivered effectively and where we can monitor it. It may end up having a shaping effect on the kinds of services that we are able to deliver in country. We will certainly enhance it because otherwise we would not be able to give the assurances we need to be able to give that it is reaching those people most in need.

Dr Evans: Can I just reflect on that? On the cost argument, this is the principal mechanism for independent verification in an environment where DFID UK partners cannot be present in theatre. To me, it seems it is a cost they cannot afford not to pay. If there is a very strong “amber” component to this review, it is here. We feel very strongly that it is the third-party monitoring. While I completely buy the arguments around trusted partners and the value of self-reporting, with a scale of response of this nature, of close to £1 billion over the last seven years, where DFID cannot be present, it is not conscionable to be able to do that without high-quality independent verification. Third-party monitoring is the solution that has been devised to that, be it Somalia or be it Yemen. It seems to us that this is very underpowered, certainly as we observed—I know things are being done now—relative to the scale of spending and to the kinds of results that DFID is claiming in this area. We think this is really important.

Lindy Cameron: Can I respond to the response? The choice is actually whether we have larger third-party independent monitoring centrally, as DFID, or whether we demand of partners that they—large NGOs or multilaterals—demonstrate to us how they have introduced effective independent monitoring systems into their own systems. There is a risk. Alison is absolutely right about the cost argument. I am not suggesting that we should not do this because of cost; I am simply saying that, in terms of your question about how many days we mandate for visits, for example, there are choices there about what we think is effective.



We absolutely buy Alison's argument that it is important to have that independence. In this context above all, independence is really important because, frankly, as I said earlier, everybody in this conflict has biases, conscious or otherwise, and all partners are operating under constraints. We are trying at multiple levels to work out how to filter for that. We very much accept the challenge that we should be looking at doing this differently in the next phase and recognising that we need to learn those lessons, but what I am saying is that I do not think it is quite the same answer in Syria as it is in Yemen or in Somalia, because they are different kinds of programmes in different operating contexts. We need to think of a more sophisticated version that learns lessons from that, but it will not look exactly the same.

Q19 Chair: I want to come back to your own monitoring and evaluation. The report said it took two years to develop the basic reporting template for delivery partners and then a further two years to implement uniform reporting tools and systems. What is your response to that concern?

Lindy Cameron: To be honest, it is a good question. I do not have the exact history on why we made the precise decisions we did on the format on the templates, as you describe it. What I am confident of is that we built a stronger programme system at the time corporately as DFID, with the smart rules, the enhanced due diligence and stronger systems that we have tried to build up, without adding bureaucracy that then becomes an extra overhead layer in the system. There are always choices about how we do this. I can come back to you in writing on the specific question on templates if that is helpful.

Q20 Chair: Please do; that would be helpful. Thank you very much. Now you have the systems, are you planning to use them elsewhere?

Ben Mellor: Some of this relates to some of our earlier discussion about that shift from an immediate crisis response into a protracted crisis response. What we have done in the Syria context is take models and partners that are skilled in operating in that immediate crisis response and then gone through that journey with them into the protracted crisis base. Exactly in the way we were talking earlier about learning the lessons about staffing and what had and had not worked in bringing the skills in, absolutely that approach of how you move at the right time from the immediate crisis response piece into the protracted crisis piece definitely has to be part of our lesson-learning from Syria for other contexts.

Lindy Cameron: We try to have a consistent set of smart rules that we use across the whole organisation—

Chair: Taking that cascade system into other contexts.

Lindy Cameron: Context by context, we can then decide where we need to do more than that. In the Syria context, on a number of occasions we have decided we need to add to the systems in order to get the kind of assurance we need. We would only do that if we thought it was necessary



in other contexts, which we might do in some, but we might adapt it in a slightly different way as well.

Q21 Chair: ICAI also found that some of the partners were still using their own system rather than your template, and they also found that there was a shortage of data on long-term outcomes rather than short-term ones. Do you recognise that assessment?

Lindy Cameron: The challenge about using our systems versus others is an interesting one on which we have had very live conversations, as you can imagine, with many of our larger partners. There is an aid effectiveness issue where we impose DFID demands for specific reporting requirements, which, for example, some of the large UN agencies would struggle with if they had to do that for every separate donor that blended funding into some of the programmes they are using. There is a balance between making sure that we get what we need in this context to be able to make good programming choices, and not imposing multiple different bilateral systems on players that respond to all of us. We do not apologise where we do that but we only do it where we think it is necessary.

Again, it is not a uniform system that we use with every partner. Frankly, it depends on a combination of performance in the multilateral aid review or the bilateral aid review, how good we think partners are overall and how much we trust their systems as to how much more we then ask of them. It also depends whether partners are repeated partners in different contexts or new and specific to the Syria context. Again, we make choices, but I certainly recognise the challenge. It is not a new one, nor is it Syria-specific, and it is a good, live debate. I have, frankly, seen teams err too far in both directions, either by imposing more than was needed or by not asking for enough. That is why we need experienced team leaders to tackle that.

Dr Evans: Quickly, I have two things there. Certainly, the efforts put into data capture, in particular, from DFID's partners have over time been pretty impressive. To the extent that that can be learned from and utilised in other contexts, that would be terrific.

To give DFID some credit, within the third-party monitoring we were happier where some of the support going through third-party monitoring was used to assess the M&E capacity of delivery partners: their M&E systems and their ability to provide a level of assurance around the quality of monitoring and evaluation. That was rather good and benefited a number of delivery partners. They talked to us directly about that, particularly some INGO partners. That was a good thing and it has certainly been a key area of DFID's investment over the last few years to get a very strong focus on monitoring and evaluation. The point, though, is the extent to which that is capturing longer-term outcomes. We are still not there. That is the next hurdle.



Lindy Cameron: That is a fair challenge to the whole Syria challenge, in particular where the complex evolution has meant that has been one of the things we worry about as one of the harder challenges.

Q22 **Mr Lewis:** Good morning. This is a question to DFID to start with. You have been building the capacity of your downstream partners—sub-contractors of delivery partners—specifically to detect fraud. How much progress have you made in persuading multilaterals that they need to do exactly the same? ICAI, I want to know whether you are satisfied with DFID's response in this context.

Ben Mellor: I can talk a little bit about what we have done in the Syria context. There is a separate ICAI report upcoming on the UN humanitarian response. Alison will want to talk on that. In terms of our approach to tackling fraud and corruption, it is across the board in the way we have put more emphasis on fraud and corruption. When we do the due diligence assessments, for example, we do them on our NGO partners and not to the same extent on multilaterals, because we have MOUs with them at a global level, which we therefore assume we apply in the Syria context. What we have done is, through our active programme management, made sure we are transmitting those same messages. We do not have the same tight controls as we have with our NGO partners that we are able to put in through our due diligence and partnership arrangements with them.

I would certainly say that I am never happy with any issues around fraud and corruption, but I am happier with the way we are getting reporting from NGO partners than I am from some of our multilateral partners. I think that is the point you are alluding to. That is something that we raise regularly, both in the field and at headquarters level, when there are particular agencies. The thing that always makes me most suspicious is if an agency gets through a year and says there has been no fraud. That is obviously a flag on the play and we would be raising that as a real concern—and we do. We look at what the systems are and what is happening, whether it is that it is not being reported to us, which has been an issue with some partners, and what we are doing about it. All the time there is constant vigilance, making sure we tackle it. It is slightly harder with some of the multilaterals, but of course we do have that strong institutional relationship where we can take it up in capitals, in New York or Geneva.

Lindy Cameron: The difference is that our internal team will often be working with the international function of one of the large multilaterals, in a collaborative way, to try to tackle that. We have had a very good relationship with the internal audit departments across the multilaterals we work with in Syria. In a number of cases, we have seen certain types of fraud where we have then been able to more rapidly identify things that had not been spotted in other partners, and to identify where, in a sense, the changing market has created different opportunities for people



to defraud the whole humanitarian system. We are able to work as a system to tackle that.

We have had really good partnerships in trying to identify areas where fraudsters have spotted opportunities more quickly than we have necessarily put up barriers to tackle it on a more systematic basis. It is a different kind of conversation. It is the same zero tolerance. It is the same demand for immediate reporting. There is probably a higher expectation, because they are often bigger organisations, that they have stronger systems to tackle that themselves.

Dr Evans: As I mentioned earlier, we undertook a view of fiduciary risk management, which included a look at the Syria programme around 2015 or so. That provided us with a bit of a baseline on this. We can say with fairly high confidence that there has been a step change within the Syria programme, around its attitude towards its own due diligence in relation to delivery partners, and the alacrity with which it is engaging with and acting on instances of fraud. Everyone we spoke to who is a delivery partner or downstream partner of DFID knows that this is their No. 1 issue. That is everyone we spoke to. "When you think of DFID, what do you think of?" "We think of conversations about managing fraud and corruption." It was clear to us that this is being treated incredibly seriously.

There is, however, an ongoing challenge with multilateral partners. It exists not only at country level but at HQ level. We are looking at that a little bit in our review of DFID's relationship with UN humanitarian agencies at the moment. Do you want to talk about any specific instances that raised our concern?

Kathryn Rzeszut: To underscore what Alison said, it was often in our conversations with the INGO delivery partners where they highlighted DFID's support and encouragement on reporting issues of fraud and corruption. With the multilaterals, there were much more challenging conversations. This highlights the different levels at which DFID is working with them, both at the country office level and at headquarters, and how you bring those conversations together.

Dr Evans: They are not always consistent. The messaging is not always consistent between HQ and country level, but in this case there is probably more consistency than in some other contexts.

Q23 **Stephen Twigg:** As you will know, at the moment the Select Committee is conducting an inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. The ICAI review highlights UNFPA's report from last year about sexual exploitation in Syria. Vulnerable women, such as widows and divorcees, were particularly at risk of being asked for sexual services in exchange for aid. ICAI found that none of the global due diligence framework, the screening tool that DFID uses to assess funding proposals in Syria or the third-party monitoring system address safeguarding specifically. How can that be justified?



Lindy Cameron: In the last five years, we have a number of steps to manage safeguarding risks as part of our broader programme, launching smart rules, due diligence and risk management frameworks, and issuing a smart guide on safeguarding. In 2018, we decided that this should be more systematic and more explicit, and launched enhanced and specific safeguarding due diligence standards for all organisations that DFID works with. As my Secretary of State has said to you, the wider safeguarding debate has renewed both the sector's and DFID's focus on ensuring we have strong, high-quality mechanisms in place to deliver the high standards of safeguarding and protection we require.

Again, this is not a new issue, not an issue specific to Syria, and not a new issue in humanitarian crises. Unfortunately, where there are people who are weak and vulnerable, there are, sadly, people who choose to exploit them. It is a very helpful recommendation, which will help to drive the broader improvement we are looking for in the sector on specifically targeting this issue, to make sure we are much more confident in those systems.

Dr Evans: We need to be clear that this is an environment in which it would be extraordinary if there were not these kinds of abuses happening, but it is all about the ability to respond, to act swiftly and transparently, with the interests of the affected populations in mind. DFID is on a learning curve in relation to that. This is not a new issue, but in terms of institutionalising that form of response it is now working incredibly hard. We hope to see some of those benefits come forth in the context of the Syria response. We know there has been a piece of work recently on gender in the Syria context, which already includes some of the checks and steps required to talk to delivery partners and downstream partners about this issue.

We in ICAI are committing to be much more on the ball about engaging on this with DFID and other Government Departments spending aid. This is a threshold moment for us to ensure we keep this on centre stage. Yes, it was difficult for us to unpick recent history in terms of DFID documentation, to understand how it was responding to the UNFPA revelations. They go back to 2015. We could not see a paper trail. It is clear that that has to change for the future. This absolutely has to be codified, understood and made transparent.

Q24 **Stephen Twigg:** You said, Alison, that DFID is on a learning curve and it is a threshold moment for ICAI, but you rightly reminded us that these are not new issues. We heard evidence in the main inquiry going back almost two decades. Do you think it is different this time? Do you think the aid world, in its broadest sense, is really going to learn the lessons this time, and this will be a sustained and lasting change, rather than some newspaper headlines earlier this year, a bit of activity and a summit, after which people forget about it again?

Dr Evans: Currently, the conjuncture is looking very positive. There needs to be no doubt that this cannot be a political agenda. It cannot be



the mission of a farsighted Secretary of State; it has to be the mission of the Department as a whole, of aid providers as a whole, and of us as scrutineers. We have to get it into our systems, into our cultures, and make sure that it persists. That seems to me to be the big challenge. The amount of energy around it right now is incredibly positive. It is coming from multiple directions. Unless, including in ICAI, we see this as core business, a core concern that persists over the years, we will have failed to take this moment seriously.

Q25 Chair: Thank you very much. In the final area, we would like to talk about learning. DFID Syria has produced some research work and has commissioned some from outside organisations, but it is unclear how much influence it is having on DFID policy. How can you improve the link between research and policy?

Lindy Cameron: This is a really good challenge. We completely accept this challenge. As I said earlier, the Syria team has been quite good at challenging itself to make sure it takes best practice within some areas of the programme and transfers it to other areas within the Syria programme. We could do better in thinking through, particularly now that the conflict has gone on so long, what lessons we need to take and how we apply them differently. As I said, looking at the Burma, Bangladesh and Rohingya crisis, it is clear to me that in other areas teams are taking on board some of those lessons about the way conflicts evolve and the likely length of refugee crises. These are lessons we need to make sure we teach to people who hit a crisis for the first time, as well as people who have seen it happen once before.

CHASE has taken on responsibility for this. There is a protracted crisis team in CHASE, which is looking at some of this. They are the hub for pulling together not just how we learn this in policy terms, but how rapid response mechanisms for the first stages of new crises are set up to have that automatically embedded in the operational response.

We have also tried to have a broader conversation about current crises. I run a regular quarterly humanitarian meeting where I get together both the regional teams working on particularly big crises and a lot of the CHASE team that work on the policy and funding issues, to challenge ourselves partly on whether we have the funding allocations right and partly on whether we have the people allocations right. Are there crises where we have too much money and not enough people, or the other way around? Are we spreading the resource we have effectively?

One of our big challenges is people. One of my scarcest resources is always the very experienced humanitarian advisers who have seen multiple crises before and therefore can anticipate some of the challenges we see. Making sure we have those in the right crises is really key. I work with the humanitarian head of profession, as well as with the policy team, to make sure that is delivered. To be perfectly honest, the first thing people do when a really rapid onset crisis hits is not to pull off the policy document; it is to look for the short lessons learnt, look for the person



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who has done this before and work out how to operationalise that quickly.

It is a very fair challenge that we need to improve the learning loops on this one, in general, and think about where we do this, so how we have those conversations. Almost all of my teams would like to have more time to have these conversations. Reflecting, for example, on the Chilcot report, that has also helped to create a culture of thoughtfulness about lesson learning across the national security community, and thoughtfulness about what might happen, how scenarios might evolve and how we might respond to them collectively. That has made it easier for us to have that conversation, as part of the broad national security community, as well as in the DFID context itself. That is very helpful.

Dr Evans: We see this issue as being so important and so integral because learning and accountability go together. They are part of a mutually reinforcing equation, if you like. A lot of the emphasis that we have had in this conversation is on those hard accountabilities around minimising fraud and corruption, around results reporting. The learning piece is what brings real meaning to all of that and also makes sure that things that have possibly not been done well in the past have the possibility of being done better in the future. We see this as really important. It is about how DFID is learning internally, how it creates space, how it gives permission to take a moment out and reflect on lessons learned. That is all really important. In a lot of ICAI reviews, we are constantly pressing providers of aid on that.

It is also about the feedback loops with affected populations. We see that as part of a learning culture, where you are not just requiring that feedback to be provided, but you are trying to build on it and learn from it. It has the potential to help you do things differently. That should be all the way down the delivery chain. There we see a real opportunity to strengthen those feedback loops. DFID has been very good on requiring delivery partners to gain feedback from communities and individuals but, across the board, they are quite rudimentary mechanisms—they are not very live mechanisms. There are lots of complaint boxes and things like this. There is no sense of how that feedback is really being used and built on in a learning environment, to do things differently or better. That seems to us, in the spirit of grand bargain and accountability to effective populations, to be really important.

Chair: Thank you. Those are all the questions we had. Kathryn, Alison, Lindy and Ben, thank you so much for your time.